

living/

THE look of utter incredulity is evident. The player, already panting from his run, is gesticulating stubbornly to the spot where he'd dived just a nanosecond earlier.

But the gentleman clad in umpire blue and looking seriously like some *Transformers* autobot with his Hannibal Lecter-esque face mask, and who had raced all the way from the home plate (the area where the batter and catcher are positioned, all of 27.5m away) to get to first base, shows no sign of reneging from his final call. Out!

There's no mistaking the clenched right fist and short hammered motion that players dread.

As far as the umpire (or ump) is concerned, despite the celluloid-worthy dive, the runner (or batter-runner in umpire parlance, which distinguishes him from someone already parked on a base) had been well and truly tagged by the first baseman.

But wait. There seems to be some confusion. And it all stems from the fact that there had actually been two different calls made.

Prior to the runner being declared out, home plate ump, from his "post" just behind the catcher, had in fact given the "safe" sign while the first base ump called out.

And the player is obviously challenging the conflicting calls. But it's to no avail. Home plate ump has decided to concede to his counterpart's decision and the runner has no choice but to depart the field, dejection in his steps.

"This is what happens when you have umpires who don't know the game rules too well." The statement is uttered quite matter-of-factly by an observer who had also been watching the drama unfolding on the field.

Recognising the voice as belonging to one of the game's stalwarts, I edge closer.

His voice low, he shares that Malaysia has yet to have qualified umpires and those that had hitherto been called upon to umpire baseball matches in the country comprised a mish-mash of individuals from the games of baseball and softball, whose knowledge of umpiring is best described as "questionable".

Noting my look of disbelief, he nods for emphasis before both our gaze settle on the oncoming figure of the player who had just had his challenge rebuffed.

PICTURES BY INTAN
MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL



TIME TO ROAR

The recent umpiring certification clinic organised by Baseball Federation Malaysia is yet another initiative in its plans for the resurgence of baseball in the country, writes
Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal



Dr Hanafiah Ayub

His gloomy face is in direct contrast to the beautiful cerulean sky, brushed not even by a single cloud on this lovely Sunday afternoon.

BACK TO SCHOOL

It's a blistering hot day on the grounds of University Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Sports Centre in Serdang, Selangor. The drama of that Sunday afternoon seems far away

now as I find myself inside a classroom filled with, yes, MORE men in blue, the word UMPIRE emblazoned across their backs.

With tables and chairs lined in a row, and not one but three "teachers" at the front, it

feels like being back at school again.

I guess it probably is for most of these men, comprising baseball/softball players, ex players and a handful of coaches who have signed up for the Baseball Federation Malaysia's (BFM) three-day Umpiring Certification Course conducted by three distinguished trainers from the Philippines — Fulgencia B. Rances Jr, former Philippines national player and certified BFA/IBAF/WBSC (Baseball Federation of Asia/International Baseball Federation/World Baseball Softball Confederation) umpire; Edgar M. Delos Reyes, head coach of the Philippine's national team; and Wilfredo D. Hidalgo Jr, Philippine national coach.

This is the final day of the course. By

now, they have all been put through the drill of umpiring rules, the proper mechanics and positioning. They have also sat for a written exam, the results of which will be combined with that of their practical assessment.

Just like with any school exam, everyone's on tenterhooks as they wonder whether they have made the grades to qualify for the coveted status of "certified umpire".

As my eyes travel across the top of their heads, which are bowed in deep concentration as they pore over some papers, I couldn't help recalling the statement made on that eventful Sunday which saw plenty of onfield rumblings due to a number of questionable calls and decisions by the presiding umpires.

Oh well, this is certainly a step in the right direction, I recall thinking, as I make my silent exit out of the room, headed for my appointment with Dr Hanafiah Ayub, BFM's senior vice president, who is waiting for me downstairs.

IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUITY

"It's about time that we have something like this," begins Hanafiah, his eyes earnest under his glasses. "All this while, we have not had officiating officials on the field who possess sufficient expertise to umpire matches. We have just been relying on experienced players to do the job."

"If this issue isn't addressed, there will be problems of incompetent umpiring when we have competitive matches, which of course will lead to a lot of dissatisfaction."

Hanafiah, who is also the Malaysian representative at the Asia University Sports Federation, adds that taking into account the federation's ambitious plans for the future of the sport in this country,



A triumphant group picture upon completion of the umpiring certification course.

PICTURES BY INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL



Back to class for aspiring umpires.



Illustrious trainers from the Philippines. From left: Fulgencia B. Rances Jr, Edgar M. Delos Reyes and Wilfredo D. Hidalgo Jr.

the need for qualified umpires has never been greater.

"We'll be concluding our first Malaysian baseball league for 2017 soon [at the time of this article's publication, it's Grand Final day for the league tournament]. Next year, we're looking to have the league extended over a longer period. We also have the UPM International tournament coming up, which involves teams from abroad, followed by the President's Cup that will see participation from states around the country. We can't just keep bringing in outside umpires for our tournaments just because we don't have qualified umpires," elaborates Hanafiah.

The director of UPM's sports development is keen to see this exercise being rolled out in stages, which would eventually lead to a database being produced containing all the relevant details on Malaysia's bank of umpires.

"So if an invitation comes from outside for a Malaysian representative, like maybe for the Asian Cup, we'd have a ready supply. For example, Japan exports its expertise. It's high time we exported ours. I can see this happening in maybe a year or two. For now, the first step is to produce umpires who are qualified to umpire games in the country."

WAKING UP THE TIGER

Philippine's head coach, Reyes, believes there's much we can be excited about. And he, just like Hanafiah, also thinks that having this umpiring clinic is the first step towards raising the popularity of the sport.

"For baseball to be popular here, you need to first establish a good programme,

one that doesn't only entail your players to train and play games here but which takes them outside of home soil for competitive games," he begins.

Exposure to international competitions and being able to play in quality games are integral in the drive for development.

Adds Reyes: "With quality games, you will attract sponsors. What's an important element to have for a quality game? Quality officiating officials — umpires. And this is what BFM is doing now. The Federation is on the right track."

His first time to the country was in 2005, shares Reyes, when he came to help Malaysia prepare its team for the SEA Games in Manila.

"Comparing then and now, I have to say that Malaysian baseball is in a better place now. The moment I saw UPM's facilities, I thought to myself, you guys couldn't have asked for a better start. Even if you don't have a standard baseball stadium yet, it's good enough to have this kind of space. Combined with a good programme, it's looking very healthy for the future."

His countryman and fellow national coach, Hidalgo, concurs, chipping in: "It's also great that the older players — the veterans or former national players — are helping the younger ones to develop their game. You need to build a solid foundation first before you can soar."

Recalling the last three days, Hidalgo, who is a member of the Philippines air force, shares that he is impressed with the eagerness displayed by participants to learn and the passion they possess for the sport.

"It can only mean good things," exclaims Hidalgo, with a knowing smile.

Nodding, Reyes adds: "With the proper programme, a proper board, the dedication of coaches and players, good facilities and, of course, support from the government and private bodies, I can see Malaysia being a force in Southeast Asian baseball in maybe three to five years' time."

Noting my raised eyebrow, Reyes smiles. His eyes dance under his glasses when he concludes: "Malaysian baseball is like a sleeping tiger. You have to wake it up. How? By providing the necessary things to prepare for its awakening. Mark

my word. Just make sure you continue the momentum!"

THE WAY FORWARD

The umpiring clinic is just among one of the many ingredients that forms part of the mix in BFM's recipe for charting the course of baseball in the country.

For too long dormant, the last notable national outing was the 2011 SEA Games. BFM, together with UPM, is determined to revive the sport as it sets its sights on next year's 18th Asian Games in Jakarta, the 2019 SEA Games in Manila and, of course, the big one, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, where baseball has made a return.

The last time the sport was played at the Olympics was in Beijing in 2008 and South Korea took home the gold.

Meanwhile, the curtains descend today on the 2017 Malaysian Baseball League, a tournament that has been contested between six teams — Raiders, Selayang Stars, Pilahdelphia (from Negri Sembilan), UPM and two KL-based Korean teams, 9Innings and KL Dragons.

The Grand Final pits the more experienced Team Raiders, helmed by its Japanese coach, David Hirofumi Sakamoto and led by captain Winson Low, against a sprightly UPM team, which is determined to spoil the party for the boys in blue.

And all along, there's already young blood being nurtured under team Putrajaya Cubs, which comprises youngsters hailing from around the Klang Valley.

Founded in 2014 by former national player Sazali Husain, the coaching team includes former national coach Ray Kril, who was with the Malaysian contingent during the 2011 SEA Games in Palembang.

BFM is not resting there. The Federation is also making preparations to make itself eligible to participate in the WBSC/BFA-sanctioned games, possibly beginning with the Asian Games in Indonesia in 2018, the first official international event for BFM since the South Eastern Asian Games in Indonesia in 2011.

So everything appears to be moving just as it should. And who knows, coach Reyes' prophecy may just come true. Maybe the sleeping tiger can be awakened. And when it does, watch it roar!

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Baseball bites

DAVID HIROFUMI SAKAMOTO, HEAD COACH, TEAM RAIDERS

"The course is most timely. Without umpires, baseball cannot develop. No matter how hard the players train, without good officials on the field, they can't enjoy a good game. I just wanted to experience for myself and that's why I signed up for the course. I can feel BFM's passion as well as that of the participants for the game's future. I hope this kind of programme can continue so that knowledge can be consistently updated and new batches of umpires created."

As a coach, I appreciate the umpire's role. I understand the challenges they face. It's good to understand the rules in detail. It goes a long way towards bringing both players and coaches to a higher level of game understanding as we now know all the little, little loopholes!"



WINSON LOW, CAPTAIN, TEAM RAIDERS

"As someone who's keen to progress beyond just a playing role, I looked forward to this course. In fact, I've sought knowledge as far as Hong Kong, attending umpiring course there too. That aside, I've found this BFM-organised one to be useful. We get to see both sides now — from the player's perspective and that of the umpire's. Now I know the kind of calls to make when certain situations arise, and the best angle to be at, etc."

Umpires are an integral component of the game. In any match, there are actually three teams — the offensive, the defensive and the umpires. Without them, we can't start. They have a huge responsibility to make good judgement calls at all times. Hopefully, we'll now be able to enjoy better quality games as we have qualified umpires to call on."



SARAVANAN SUBRAMANIAM, CATCHER, TEAM RAIDERS

"As a player, I never fully understood just how challenging an umpire's role is. It was just so easy to get angry with them all the time for unsatisfying calls! Now I know better. I've learnt a lot from the course and can't wait to apply my knowledge during real games."

What makes a good umpire? You must be firm, be calm always, and have 100 per cent conviction with the calls you make."

